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AUTHOR	Bloom, Lynn Z.
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ABSTRACT

Many traditionally held academic views of personal writing have myths embedded in them. These myths include: (1) anything written in the first person singular is autobiographical; (2) personal writing can only exist in an expressionist classroom and is often uncritical and unproblematic; (3) student personal writing is a dying genre, and college courses should concentrate on the new, complicated and difficult; (4) all personal writing is sufficiently alike in intellectual and aesthetic dimensions to be unrewarding to read or write; (5) encouraging students to write personally will cause them to be solipsists and egotists and to resist further writing development; and (6) personal writing is the antithesis of the normative, intellectually rigorous, objective way of dealing with information and controversy in the academic world. Overcoming these myths in the composition classroom and curriculum will encourage engaged reading, writing, and exchanging of ideas. (EF)

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That Way Be Monsters: Myths and Bugaboos about Teaching Personal Writing.

By Lynn Z. Bloom

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Lynn Z. Bloom/English Department U-25/U of CT/Storrs, CT 06269-1025
C:\CompTalks\CCCCMyths in Teaching Personal Writing
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That Way Be Monsters: Myths and Bugaboos About Teaching Personal Writing

The night before every semester begins I have an anxiety dream. As a new TA, I thought it only fitting that the Jehovah-esque visage of my department chair, a Miltonist, would appear in the empyrean void without fail, "Mrs. Bloom, you can do no right." I have not, alas, outgrown such dreams; indeed, over the years they have provided terrifying variations on a theme. I have forgotten my books. I have neglected to prepare a syllabus. I have raced frantically up and down infinite corridors looking for the class that has never materialized. I have taken off my suit jacket only to realize . . . . My favorite, in order of ascending horror, occurred a couple of years ago with a phone call from the Dean the evening before my advanced composition class was to begin. "I want you to know," he announced decisively, "that instead of teaching writing I've reassigned you to teach calculus." "But I'm an English teacher," I replied, "I don't know anything about teaching calculus." "You can read, can't you?" he thundered. "Just go in there with your book open and keep one page ahead of the students." When I wake up I realize that this is exactly the advice, and the only advice, I had been given forty years earlier on how to teach composition.

Deconstructing the Introduction

Such stories, even brief ones, make us want to hear more, and to tell our own right back. They get us where we live. All writing is personal, whether it sounds that way or not, if the writer has a stake in the work. That it is difficult to separate, say, the academic from the personal should be clear from the seemingly personal introduction I've just provided. What you know about my life from hearing this introduction will be--if I've kept control over the narrative--far less than you can tell about my art. Anyone who cares enough about a subject to write about it is saying to the reader, as Joan Didion explains, "listen to me, see it my way, change your mind." To do this, as we tell stories or incorporate stories and personal asides into more formal academic writing, we are using conventional (even unconventional) literary techniques to win the hearts and minds of our readers. In fact, this introduction has:

a. A *persona*-or more than one–speaking in a *voice*.
b. *Theme(s)*, *motifs*, which implicitly *argue* or *demonstrate* a *point*.
c. A *structure*--overall, of individual paragraphs and sentences, with *dominant, parallel,* and *subordinate* parts, and with a *climax*. Whatever *thesis* there is *implied,* not stated overtly; this complex of brief stories embeds other stories and still others.
d. *Evidence*, proportionate to the emphasis and analysis the piece entails.
e. A *tone*, or if you prefer, a *chord of tones*, one dominant, others echoing.
f. Other *characters*--known by what they say (*dialogue*--"You can read, can't you?"), and by what they do.
g. *Setting(s)*.
h. *Verbal repetition* and *variation, alliteration, assonance, rhythm*.
i. *Punctuation* that reinforces all the other elements, structural and stylistic.

These are the techniques we teach our students in the process of teaching them strategies of any kind of writing in any genre, critical, creative, or anything else. The kind of personal writing I am discussing here incorporates and conveys the essence of what professional writers know about their craft, and the ways that many professionals write. Make no mistake. Personal writing requires the same tough-minded analytic capability that academic discourse involves (see Behar); it is only that the personal-sounding writer appears to be cruising on overdrive instead of grinding gears on the uphill climb. Indeed, through writing and revising course papers that incorporate personal writing, student writers come to understand

what all writers need to know:

1. That a particular experience, common or unusual, can be rendered in innumerable versions, voices, modes.
2. That nominally personal writing can send numerous messages with social, political, cultural, ethical (and many other) implications.
3. That style is intimate kin to substance and to self.
4. That the unsaid–de–emphasis, omissions, gaps, erasures–is potentially as significant as what is said.
5. That dishonest can destroy a piece, ethically and aesthetically.
6. That nothing is insignificant–every word, every syntactic structure, every punctuation mark–counts; the format as well as the form send a host of messages.
7. That critical rigor undergirds writing well. ("Write hot, edit cold.")
8. That most writing benefits from rewriting, and rewriting, and rewriting....
9. That it is important to read literature, as well as to write it, with an understanding of the writer's craft, the writer's art. (L. Bloom, "Textual Terror," 58)

They also come to learn what all professional writers understand–the nature of the myths and bugaboos that cling to some academicians' views of personal writing as lint to velcro

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Myths About Personal Writing, and Their Relation to Teaching

A curriculum without controversy would be moribund indeed. By this criterion, personal writing is alive and vigorous--and, in the opinions of those suspicious of the "expressivist composition classroom" (Dixon 257)--highly dangerous. To my knowledge, there is no research that demonstrates the superiority of teaching students to write in academic jargon–what we might label the *Ways of Reading* approach–over any other ways of teaching writing. Yet to write in one's own voice, to reveal that one is personally invested in one's material, is to come perilously close to the edge of the academic world as we know it, say the naysayers. Many of these critics and flat-earth pedagogues view personal writing as mariners of old regarded the edge of the earth, "That way be monsters." That their arguments embed myths as the old maps embedded monsters should be clear from the following discussion.

Myth #1. *Anything written in the first person singular is autobiographical.* This is not necessarily so. Although it *sounds* personal, my introduction does not tell you anything personal about myself–except to imply that I approach each semester in a state of terror, and that I'm a wimp around administrators. (Whether these characteristics have remained constant over four decades I leave to your conjecture.) Nor is it true that everything written in the third person is impersonal; *all* scientific, technical, and business writings, all writings of any kind have a point of view--except perhaps alphabetical listings in phone books.

Myth #2. *Personal writing, created by "U.S. composition teachers," is a "school genre that can exist only in an expressivist composition classroom"* (Dixon 257). This innocent view of the genre would come as a surprise not only to essayists ranging from Swift and Steele to Woolf and Wolfe and the Wolffs; to autobiographers from Augustine to Angelou; and to many colleagues presenting at this conference, including the Program Chair. Personal writing lives wherever real people live and write.

What Dixon may be objecting to, and justifiably so, is the uncritical, unproblematical assignnment of narrative writing, aka "the personal essay," aka variations on "What I Did on My Summer Vacation." As Judith Summerfield explains, students at all levels "are asked to write about or represent or `re-create' or even `reproduce' their actual experiences. . . significant or memorable or meaningful . . . . Such assignments often assume that such writing is `easy,' `natural,' that students can simply transcribe their real life experiences without critical or analytic thought" (182).

This view is epitomized in a parody I have written, a reductionist version of the stereotypical, five-paragraph freshman theme, loosely modeled on E.B. White's classic "Once More to the Lake."

What I Did on My Summer Vacation

On my summer vacation I went blueberry picking with my family.

Our two sons, Laird and Bard; Sarah, Laird's wife; and Vicki, Bard's girlfriend, went with me. Paul, our beloved 8-month-old grandson and the "apple"--or should I say "blueberry"--of our eye, was having his morning nap, so my husband stayed home with him.

We went to Crooke's, an orchard near where we live in eastern Connecticut. The Crooke family are farmers who run it, and as you would realize if you knew them, they are not crooks at all.

Together we picked twenty-eight-and-one-half pounds in an hour. We brought them home and made the best blueberry jam ever. Everyone got five jars of jam and a big bowl of fresh blueberries to take home the next day.

We had such a nice time we can hardly wait to do it again next year! Picking blueberries is what I did on my summer vacation.

This parody illustrates some of the worst features often attributed to personal writing. It is a (1) *narrative* (what else?), (2) *strictly chronological*. The treatment of the subject is (3) *superficial* and (4) *unanalytic*, the (5) *language simplistic* and (6) *self-conscious*. For instance, putting quotation marks around "apple" and "blueberry" is an uncomfortable way to tell even an obvious--and poor--joke. The writer, (7) *uncertain of getting the point across*, (8) *spells out interpretations* that would be embedded more subtly in a more assured narrative: the Crookes aren't crooks; Paul is, (9) *redundantly*, both "beloved" and (10) *cliche* "the apple . . . of our eye." The (10) *obvious*, "We had such a nice time . . ." is reinforced by the ingenue's friend, an exclamation point! The (11) *writer addresses the reader directly, with unwarranted familiarity*, "you"--"as you would realiz. . . ." All of these combine to give the writer, presumably a mature adult, the (12) *unwitting persona*, in this case, of an innocent child. Except for the sentence about Paul, however, the parody is not (13) *conspicuously sentimental*, and it is not (14) *overwritten, full of patches of purple prose*. (I might add that you'll find a more sophisticated version of this essay, "Writing *Blue Berries*: Once More to My Summer Vacation," in *Writing on the Edge*, 1998.)

Many of these features are characteristic of inexpert writing of any sort, whether it's personal, analytic, or any other kind: it's superficial, unduly simplistic, self-conscious, obvious, and redundant, among other things. But these simply don't exist in expert personal writing, as the core works in many freshman readers make clear–among them James Baldwin, Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, Scott Russell Sanders, Amy Tan, Lewis Thomas, Alice Walker, and Richard Wright. And they don't need to occur in student writing either.

Myth #3. *The students' vein of personal writing has been tapped dry from years of personal bloodletting in elementary and high school. College courses should concentrate on what's new, complicated, and difficult. It's time to move on.* Critics, authors and editors of commercially viable composition texts, and some scholar-teachers are discovering what professional belletristic writers have known all along--how hard it is to write as a human being. Writing the personal essay is no longer regarded as the automatic, unintellectual, unaltered, unedited pasting of life events to the page. As Virginia Woolf observes in *Orlando*, "Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces" (3)

Personal writing can be both complicated and difficult. Teachers should consider, says Summerfield, "the rhetorical situation, the pressures of the task, the moment itself, the listener, the context, and the writer's `affective and volitional' needs and desires (Vygotsky), all of which "influence and shape the

writing." They can use this to help their composition students "explore the textual conventions, constraints, options, and possibilities of the particular task" (182).

Indeed, many essays are--or can be--hybrids, of form and in intermingling personal and other types of writing, as this talk itself illustrates. Depending on the assignment, a writer can transform a particular event into an autobiographical narrative; into an essay that makes a point or argues a thesis, explicitly or implicitly; into a psychological, anthropological, sociological, or historical case study; into fiction. As Summerfield observes:

> . . . with various transformations of the "same" event into different genres, student writers can confront writerly questions: If I want this transformation to "feel real," then what do I have to do? What are the textual and cultural conventions for making a narrative feel real? What choices do I have? Dialogue? The present tense? Paratactic (rather than hypotactic) syntax, to give the sense of hitherto unknown events unfolding before the reader's eyes? Saving the point for last? Using implicit evaluation? (185).

Myth #4. *All personal writing is alike, or sufficiently alike in intellectual and aesthetic dimensions to be unrewarding to either read or write.* The examples throughout this talk, as well as other works you know and love, have already provided a rebuttal. Every author of a personal essay addresses this issue--in a different voice. Or look at any collection of essays, such as Atwan's *The Best Essays of* any given year since 1986, or Lopate's rival *Anchor Essay Annual* (since 1997), the works of any belletristic writer, or the entire range of essay collections intended for freshman composition.

Indeed, most contemporary freshman readers are intended to stimulate provocative, tough-minded (read *critical)* reading, thinking, and writing. They contain an enormous amount (35-100%) and diversity of personal writing, irrespective of their focus--on belletristic writing, critical thinking and argument, rhetorical issues (including modes of discourse) language and style, multiculturalism, or a host of topics ranging from gender to environmental concerns. Whether canonical or new, much of this writing is technically complicated and intellectually demanding. Issues are addressed from the gender balanced, multiethnic, culturally diverse perspectives to which all contemporary anthologies subscribe, whether they focus on *critical thinking and writing; genres, types of writing,* or *modes of discourse*; or *particular themes* (such as cultural pluralism, feminism, or ecology, to name three common types).

Must a personal essay be read personally? Not necessarily. Textbook editors suggest a wide range of readings of E.B. White, and all essayists, from a variety of perspectives: rhetorical, stylistic, philosophical, thematic, dialogic, social constructionist. Thus depending on the textbook, students are encouraged to read "Once More to the Lake" as an example of one of the conventional *modes of discourse:* description (Kennedy, Kennedy & Aaron, *Bedford Reader*, 6th ed.), narration (Miller, *Prentice Hall*, 4th ed.), comparison and contrast (Bloom, *Essay Connection*, 6th ed.); or *other type of writing:* personal report (Peterson, Brereton & Hartman, *Norton Reader*, 9th ed.).; or for its *memorable style* (Smart, *Eight Modern Essayists*, 6th ed.). Thematically, it can evoke the "spirit of place" (Anderson and Runciman, *Forest of Voices*), the operation of memory (Smart), growing up (Bloom), relationships and "ignorance and insight" (Clifford and DiYanni, *Modern American Prose*, 3rd ed.), "sports and recreation" (Kirszner), and a host of others.

Myth #5. *Personal writing is, well, too personal. If students are encouraged to write personally they will become masters of solipsism and nothing else. Egotists already, they will remain self-focused, using themselves and their experiences as the norm and the only norm for their understanding of the world.* This might happen if all the writing assignments and all the teachers of freshman composition encouraged only solipsistic writing. But they don't. Just as most good personal writing transcends the solipsistic, so do good personal writing assignments.

In *Is there a text in this class?* Stanley Fish, addressing "the authority of interpretive communities," tells us "not to worry." In his view, no student is, as Donne might have said, "an island, entire of himself

alone, but a piece of the continent, a part of the main":

> The fear of solipsism, of the imposition by the unconstrained self of its own prejudices, is unfounded because the self does not exist apart from the communal or conventional categories of thought that enable its operations (of thinking, seeing, reading). Once we realize that the conceptions that fill consciousness, including any conceptions of its own status, are culturally derived, the very notion of an unconstrained self, of a consciousness wholly and dangerously free, becomes incomprehensible. (335)

Does the personal essay require personal writing in response? Again the answer must be, "not necessarily." Writing that survives freshman English has to "teach well." Thus it must be accessible to many students over time–and hence, of long-lasting cultural or other significance. It must allow a variety of relevant readings, sustain student interest, support rigorous rhetorical analysis; and engender a variety of writing assignments that will address not only course's numerous pedagogical aims but also the subtexts of both the course and the institution. A work should be a pleasure to teach--because it's inspiring, controversial, provocative, fun, outrageous, whatever. Good personal writing has no monopoly on these characteristics of pedagogically effective writing, but it can more than hold its own.

As Summerfield explains,

> We ask students . . . for their texts, not their lives. The distinction is crucial: the discourse is not the event. It is not real life. To distinguish event from discourse is to respect the confusions, mutabilities, shifts, and needs of memory, to problematize memory; it is to foreground, in the classroom, questions about how and why we remember, how writing itself transforms memory, and how discourse arises out of the writing or telling situation (183).

Myth #6. *Personal writing is the antithesis of intellectually rigorous, abstract, objective ways--the normative ways–of dealing with information and controversy throughout the rest of the academic world.* This statement ignores the issue that *all* writing is a matter of opinion, no matter how objective it looks, and that *all* writing has an agenda, no matter how disinterested it appears. In brief, the claim is that personal writing keeps writers out of the academic loop, denying them access to academia's normative discourse and all the rights and privileges thereto. This is, as Berthoff would say, a killer dichotomy, and it's wrong.

Students can as readily learn how to read and think critically and to understand a variety of discourse communities from reading and analyzing autobiographies and other personal writings as any other kinds of literary texts. College freshmen for the most part are just beginning to learn how experts in various academic disciplines think, what they consider good questions, and how they investigate these. As Rose demonstrates so eloquently in *Lives on the Boundary*, many students come to chemistry, biology, psychology and other disciplines as strangers to strange lands, uncertain and unwitting wayfarers who don't understand the native languages or the modes in which they're used. If such students try to write about unfamiliar subjects in the alien tongue and manner of a particular discipline, this writing may impede "genuine understanding," as Elbow points out in "Reflections on Academic Discourse." "Often the best test of whether a student understands something," says Elbow, is the ability to "translate it out of the discourse of the textbook . . . into everyday, experiential, anecdotal terms" (137). In discussing many topics, writers can choose among a wide range of forms and styles; a given subject does not necessarily cry out for abstract analysis rather than more humanized discussion, or a combination of both.

It makes theoretical, critical, and pedagogical sense to teach students to write–almost anything, in nearly any composition or literature course--by laying our own lives on the line. In *Textual Power*, Robert Scholes offers the revolutionary, but highly common-sensical principle that the best way to undertand a text is to produce a text in response to it: "Our job is not to produce `readings' for our students, but to give them tools for producing their own." Thus we can and should introduce our students to "the codes upon which all textual production depends," and then encourage them to write their own texts in

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response to the texts they read in a literature course, any literature course (24-25).

One of the best ways to encourage our students to take the plunge is to jump in ourselves--and to let them see us struggling with our work-in-progress, not just the finished draft. It's not fair to ask students who don't know the teacher and whom the teacher doesn't know to expose themselves before the class has had time to create a community of trust and understanding. So I go first, early in the semester. The first time I tried this, about a decade ago, with an essay on "Why I Write" for my course in "Teaching Writing" for new TAs, I was terrified. How could I make myself so vulnerable to the students whose authority figure I was supposed to be? whom I couldn't escape for the rest of the semester? Nevertheless, I was obliged to be as candid with my students and as tough with myself as I expected them to be in their own writing. So I explained that, among other reasons, I wrote in hopes that my parents would be so proud they

> would invite me, the published author, back into the family they had thrown me out of, stunned, at twenty-four when I married out of their non-religion, a Jew. [But] my father carefully misread my major books, the ones the reviewers especially liked, and ignored the rest. He never praised one syllable.

My hands were shaking (as they do whenever I read my personal professional writing in class, and my body turns to ice) as I concluded:

> My father is dead now, and whether he ever loved me or my writing enough is beyond change . . . . In writing about families . . . I rejoin the family of my own choosing. I am part of them. They cannot throw me out; I take them in. I write to remain a member of the human race, the family that encompasses us all ("Finding a Family," 20).

Every semester I write more, and expect more of my writing, in technique and substance. I still tremble and turn to ice as I do before today's audience) and sometimes there are tears in my eyes, though the writing is never confessional. But this reading serves to remind me that I am asking my students, too, to lay their lives on the line. I want their experience in any course I teach to inform their subsequent reading and writing–and to change the rest of their lives. Indeed, writing any paper of my own, particularly when it contains autobiography, and sharing the drafts of it with the students quickly democratizes the academy, as Behar notes (B2), establishing a community of writers, equal in exposure, experimentation, vulnerability. Instantly, we become colleagues--peers in sharing the risks, in assuming the authority over our own texts in earning the right to offer critiques of each others' writing and the works we are reading. When we write as people, students and teachers alike, with heart and voice, body and soul as well as mind, we overcome the myths, banish the bugaboos, and write not from sentimentality but a desire to engage understanding at "the deep heart's core" (Yeats).